

Viv inspected her living quarters two hours later. The garrison had moved fast after she had agreed and cleared her space in minutes. It helped that the average soldier could apparently lift their own weight in supplies.

Her new domain covered a single circular room at the heart of the fort's watchtower. Two barred windows leading to the fort's walls on either side let fresh air in. They could be shuttered at night. There was a corridor outside of her room that doubled as an antechamber and as an access point to a ladder leading to the tower's upper floor and its alarm fire. The place had been dusty, but one of the soldiers had shyly stretched a hand and created a directed air gust to clean it. She remembered Solfis mentioning that such tricks were common around all humans, more so around older people. She had no access to them. The only thing she could wield was black mana.

She set Arthur's lair near the window. The small one had proven huffy after so many changes in her environment. Having a corner to herself and regular food had appeased the beast enough that she was not being too difficult. Viv wondered exactly how smart Arthur was. Solfis could not answer. Sometimes, she acted like a smart dog, but sometimes she displayed signs of human intelligence, like today when she had allowed the presence of so many humans around her without panicking. Any other earthly predator would have lashed out, she thought.

After that, she designed one half of the room to the study of magic with Solfis' core placed on a solid stone chair. The farther part of the room was separated by the tent cloth hung between poles for privacy, and contained a bed frame and her bedrolls. An embarrassed Jor had handed her a washbasin and a small yellow lump she had tentatively qualified as soap. She even had a small litter filled with sand for her pet's needs. A delicate attention.

This was such a fucking dump.

But, it was hers, and it was a vast improvement over dying in a ditch.

Moving in also helped her get an idea about the fort and its content.

What the fort had was:

- A garrison of three knights and fifteen soldiers, not exactly the cream of the crop, but well-trained and decently equipped.
- A lot of food.
- A lot of water in an underground cistern but not enough for baths.
- Books she could use.

- A large-scale isolation ring to keep the black mana out.

What it did not have was:

- Wood for fire. They only had enough coal to cook and that was it. The rest was provided by the handful of soldiers who could conjure small flames.
- Magical equipment to stop powerful creatures. Only Cernit and Benetti had magic swords.
- Medical supplies.
- Tea or coffee.

And that was depressing. She had piping hot water if she wanted, but nothing to put in it. And the worst thing was that infusions existed, it was just that the trio of officers had already drunk everything during the first month.

They did not even have booze because it was contraband.

They should just rename the Fort as Fort-No-Fun-Allowed instead of Fort Sky. It was a good thing the garrison swapped every three months.

Once she was set, Solfis attracted her attention.

**//We must start working on my frame without delay, Your Grace.**

“I’ll help as best as I can. I bet that you can’t wait to move on your own again.”

**//Indeed,**

**//My immobility has been a burden on my thoughts since we first met.**

**//Particularly since the dragon spawn’s attack.**

“I can imagine. Alright, let’s get you ambulatory. Where do we begin?”

**//Much like naming you heir, this will be skirting the limit of my hard-coded directives.**

**//We are allowed to self-repair, but not to modify or rebuild ourselves.**

**//Fortunately, I am in possession of a functional bone-based blueprint.**

**//It was designed by a student team as a cheap way to bypass metal-specific tools of destruction.**

**//Naturally, my previous frame was a work of art without equal, one that was orders of magnitude deadlier and sturdier than one made from materials harvested from meatbags.**

**//This unit will make do.**

**//The dragon bones will serve us well.**

**//I will need you to order me to repair myself according to that specific blueprint.**

Viv stole a glance at Arthur. The small dragon was asleep in her new den. If it bothered her to eat her kin or ride in the bones of her mother, she has shown no signs of it. She hoped that giving Solfis a new body made from a dubious source material would not affect her.

“Fine. Make it so.”

**//The first step will be to give me an arm.**

Solfis guided her then. The core unit had several sliding doors on its surface, including the one that hid the chord she used to recharge his emergency battery. One of them contained a small repair kit including some sort of engraving equipment that she could hook to one of the core’s cables.

**//You will need to write a glyph for me.**

**//First, we are going to practice writing it on the table.**

Viv remembered the difficulty in getting the hang of the pierce glyph, and stopped for a moment.

“You cannot write it yourself, right?”

**//No, Your Grace.**

“Is it a question of movement or a question of directive?”

**//Movement, Your Grace.**

**//I may operate on my frame for the sake of repairs.**

**//Even if it requires redrawing a glyph according to a blueprint.**

“But you can see what I write?”

**//Correct.**

“Then how about this, I will sweep the stylus over the target area and you will only activate it when it passes over a space that needs to be engraved,” she offers, thinking about printing machines.

**//That is... an excellent idea, Your Grace.**

In the end, they could not proceed exactly like that due to a problem of strength, but Solfis managed to make cuts along the lines of the glyph and thus drew its general shape. After that, he monitored the engraving by cutting off the power when Viv screwed up.

**//A brilliant workaround, Your Grace.**

**//Have you worked with golems before?**

“In a way, yes. Now let’s assemble that thing.”

The bone Solfis selected as his arm was part of the dragon’s wings. The limb ended up being quite long: twice the size of Viv with an elbow in the middle. It took two hours to finish the thing but when she had, she hooked the power chord to the base of the humerus (or at least it would be the humerus in a man), and the limb shivered and moved.

**//This unit must calibrate the limb.**

**//My energy consumption will increase drastically.**

**//I will require a charge every few hours until I can finish working on the mana crystal.**

“You will need me to charge it?”

**//Yes, Your Grace.**

**//Do not worry, I will be able to operate for several hours on a minimal charge.**

Viv charged Solfis’ battery and left him to his calibrations. The golem was patiently working through the operation of his new makeshift arm knuckle by knuckle, and she had better things to do. She left her room and came out into the courtyard, then into the barracks facing her. The smell hit her immediately. The handful of soldiers there studiously avoided her gaze.

All except one. A short man with a shaved head. He crossed eyes with her for just a second, but in there she saw something that she did not like.

She should not be surprised that Varran would send its more... problematic recruits here. Thankfully, she had her spells and the favor of the leaders. She would still keep her guard up.

The short incident reminded her that humanity had not changed simply because it could create flames from thin air. The caution she had displayed during her previous life would serve her well there.

She turned to the side and into the main dormitory. It was time for her to get her books.

The barracks was the only building with two levels besides the tower. The ground floor was a single room covered in bunks that smelled like a dead skunk. A set of stairs led up and to the knights’ individual rooms. There were soldiers resting, all of whom huddled fearfully when she stepped in. She climbed and found Cernit’s quarters.

The lieutenant glanced up from his desk with the face of a deer caught in headlights. He blushed and comically straightened himself, looking around to see that he left his knickers on his straw bed.

The place was spartan. Just like everything else here, it was saturated with the overpowering stench of old sweat. The limited water made any cleaning arduous, so she could hardly blame the bashful man. It was just a shocking fact of life that a zombie —sorry, revenant— infested plain smelled better than a fort populated by the living.

Viv made the universal sign of opening a book and the man uttered a few words she did not understand, probably along the line of 'oh right you want my books' or whatever. He opened a drawer and took out three heavy tomes bound in leather. They looked well-worn, but were otherwise in a surprisingly good condition.

Then, he opened the first one and started pointing at things.

She approached and looked at the page. It was, she realized, the first time she saw Varran written down. Fortunately, it appeared that the Old Empire writing system was the same as theirs, so she could read it without issue, although it was difficult to understand. It was a bit like reading a latin language when you already knew another. She could get the general gist of the story.

Not that it was all that difficult. The book was a bestiary with images of monsters on one side, and detailed explanation on the other.

Cernit stepped back into his desk and she started turning the pages, curious. Some entries included only a very small image and little text. Most concerned what appeared to be small woodland creatures.

The entry for dragons alone took three pages.

She traced the illustration with a finger. It depicted an adult dragon roasting a full contingent of knights at a cavern's entrance. The artist had spared no efforts to make the beast look fearsome. It was surprising to see that the depiction matched the image of a Western dragon to a curious degree. She wondered how that could have happened.

She grabbed the three tomes under her arm and saluted Cernit, who appeared relieved to see her go. Besides the bestiary, there was also a primer on spell recognition and a brief history of the region complete with map. They all looked heavily used, if still in a good state. She supposed that there were not a lot of distractions here.

Solfis was still practicing simple gestures when she returned.

Back in the office, Cernit dismissed his fear. That was ridiculous. The woman clearly followed a path of wild magic mixed with taming, and the beast was a marsh drake. Or something similar. Nobody would be stupid enough to try and tame a dragon. It was a suicidal endeavor that always ended in blood and flames. Dragons were proud creatures with an instinctive understanding of magic and an intelligence that only grew keener as time went on. They would always fight against their bonds and escape in the end. The woman was simply being curious. That was it.

He shook his head and stared at the map before him. All his notes were ready.

It was time to go on the offensive.

Viv was trying to create a ball of black mana.

The energy in her hand was, errr, an ellipsoid. If one was generous. She had already taken the first step which consisted of making it move around itself. Mana was a living thing, even the black one, and it was easier to move it than to make it stay.

She still faced difficulties.

She could feel her conduit most of the time and send tendrils reliably and accurately, but her fine control was still garbage. Even Bzzt looked a bit frayed. The current training aimed at improving that.

“At least, this is fun,” she admitted to herself.

**//The method I teach you was designed to be perceived as a game by the participants.  
//A necessary step when said participants are six years old at the beginning of the training.**

“Yes, you mentioned it before. I like it. And you always vary the tasks as well.”

**//Your training conditions have been assessed as: extremely adversarial, your grace.  
//Your commitment has exceeded this unit’s expectations.**

“I told you that there was no magic where I come from, yes? This is not just new to me, it also represents something... unbelievable. I cannot get enough of watching the magic move around. Feel it. And when it flows where I guide it, I feel waonder.”

**//Apologies, your grace, this unit cannot empathize.**

“Just imagine that you spend years inside of a basic frame thinking there is nothing else to the world, then someone transfers your core to a powerful frame and now you realize how much more you could be.”

**//Processing.**

**//This unit understands.**

**//Then, you do believe that this world is superior to the previous one, with regard to your own experience?**

Viv realized that she had stepped right into that one.

“This is not about the world, it’s about the people in it. I left everyone behind.”

**//What if you could leave now?**

“What do you mean?”

**//Rewording.**

**//If you could leave now, how many people would you leave behind, your grace?**

**//How many people would die?**

“I... It’s...I would not leave you now. Not until the necromancer is dealt with.”

**//And once it is done, your grace, what then?**

**//In your own world, you can make an impact.**

**//In this world, you could usher a new era of peace and prosperity.**

**//You can reach the very heights of power and magic mastery.**

**//You certainly have the skill and discipline.**

**//Imagine how much good we could achieve, together.**

“I do not owe the world its salvation, Solfis. You probably also overestimate me.”

**//This unit does not overestimate fleshy beings.**

That was true, but he did not understand them either.

“Even if I could become a powerful caster, I am no politician. I lack the savviness.”

And the poker face. And the patience. And... the list was long, as her father had once noted.

**//You would be amazed how smooth negotiations proceed when the other side knows it can be wiped out.**

**//And you already acquired the intimidation skill.**

**//We are well on schedule for the genocidal maniac skill.**

“There is no such a thing,” Viv grumbled.

Solfis’ words were a venom coursing through her mind. Pride, greed, the lust for power, the desire to change the world for the better and to leave an impact. It called to all of her most basic elements of her human nature. The worst thing was that she knew it and was still tempted. That particular snake understood her only too well.

A knock on the door, and she lost her focus, the black orb dispersing harmlessly.

“Come on in,” she offered.

Cernit entered, dressed in his armor. He carried a rolled parchment under one arm.

“Hello, miss,” he told her in Old Imperial. He looked pleased when she replied, and turned to Solfis for a quick conversation. Viv used the opportunity to remake the ball.

**//Lieutenant Cernit has an intriguing proposal, your grace.**

“Do tell.”

**//As you know, we expect the necromancer to come here to destroy the fort, as it has destroyed the other ones.**

**//Cernit proposes to take the offensive and deplete them of resources.**

“He want to go out and kill revenants?”

**//No, your grace.**

**//Revenants are inconsequential in the siege to come.**

**//The necromancer’s strength will come from special undead, like the gut spiller your slew last night.**

Wow, it had been less than a day. It felt like longer.

**//Lieutenant Cernit has documented the nearby lairs that may harbor special undead.**

**//Slaying them preventively will deny the necromancer access to easily obtained, valuable assets.**

**//In addition, they will be easier to kill when nobody controls them.**

**//If possible, this unit could use a large ribcage as well.**

**//If you would be so kind as to acquire one.**

“Yeah, that’s a great idea. The killing, I mean. When are we leaving?”

Solfis relayed the question. Cernit seemed a bit taken aback.



**//I believe that he expected more resistance on your part, your grace.**

“I don’t have time for this. Though, we cannot take you with us so we should discuss strategy here and now.”

Solfis translated and Cernit left the parchment unrolled on a table, then rushed off to fetch his mates. Viv decided to have a gander.

Cernit’s drawing skills were, well, the less said, the better. She did recognize the fort at the center and several other landmarks. Three of the closest ones had been circled in red.

“I am no detective, but I bet those are the ones he wants to visit.”

**//Your fleshy intellect does you credit, your grace.**

She rolled her eyes. Soon, Cernit returned with Jor and Benetti and her bedroom smelled of a locker room again. She winced.

As before, Cernit talked and Solfis translated.

**//The lieutenant proposes to ride to the first village and set up at the top of a small hill.**

“Ride? Only the three of you?” she asked. She had noticed the stable, but she was pretty sure that it did not host eighteen horses.

**//The lieutenant says that the soldiers are here to watch and defend the fort.**

**//Their armors are not enchanted.**

**//Only knights may safely ride out.**

**//Even then, they will suffer from mild poisoning before the end of their shift.**

“Will the three of us suffice to hold back the population of a village?”

Another discussion, during which Benetti also offered an input.

**//He says that they will fight from horseback.**

**//If the pressure becomes too much, You will all ride out.**

**//Their horses can outrun most creatures, at least for a short while.**

“So they bring me close and keep the revenants away and I prioritize the big ones?”

**//Indeed.**

**//Although, if you can, thin the herd as well.**

**//Any revenant you kill now will be one less revenant climbing the walls.**

**//Necromancers always aim for population centers, for efficiency.**

“I understand. I do get tired if I cast too much in quick succession.”

**//I shall relay this information to them.**

**//As well as the effective range and casting time of... ‘yoink’.**

His voice conveyed mild disapproval. Her spell names sure wouldn’t increase her intimidation skill any time soon.

They spent a few more minutes to learn a few key words like ‘flee’, ‘left’, ‘right’, ‘help’ at Viv’s insistence, then the men left to grab their weapons. They all gathered in the main court, Viv climbed behind Jor once again and then they were off through the fortress gates and into the deadlands.

Back into Viv’s room, Solfis turns around when the lock clicks and the door unlocks. The bald man Viv had noticed entered with a wild look, followed by another with dirty blond hair and a large scar on his cheek. The blond man pocketed a lockpick and looked around warily.

“Don’t know about that, Hern. Spellcaster business is bad business. I got only one cheek left.”

“Relax. We’re only looking.”

The bald man’s filthy meatbag eyes descended on the perfect and glossy surface of Solfis’ core. The golem had stopped working on his calibration and started to engrave the next arm, but he stopped when he recognized the presence of intruders.

“So that’s the core hey? What do you reckon it could weigh?”

“At least six stones. Maybe more. Would take two strong men to carry over a long distance. Very strong. Power of thirty, at least.”

“Not you then, Rayd you twig. I reckon Parek could use the money. We steal the knight armors, one each, and leg it. They cannot follow if they get poisoned.”

“Still gotta be a lot of money to risk it.”

“It sure is. Those fancy toys always fetch their weight in gold, I tell ya.”

**//The question, then, is whether or not you will live to enjoy it.**

The two intruders jump and stare wide-eyed at the glistening perfection. It had addressed them in proper Varran.

“Did it speak?”

**//Yes, ‘Hern’, this unit spoke to you.**

**//The deadlands will eat you alive.**

**//But even assuming you escape it.**

**//Even assuming you somehow bypass the ones who destroyed Fort Stone.**

**//Even assuming you find a buyer.**

**//This unit will make itself valuable to the buyer.**

**//This unit will wait until it is encased in a mighty frame.**

**//Then, this unit will leave to find a balding man named Hern and a scarred man named Reyd.**

**//This unit never tires, never sleeps, and never stops.**

**//This unit will find you.**

**//This unit will kill you.**

**//In the most painful manner it can figure out.**

**//And it will have ample time to figure it out.**

“Alright, fuck. Calm down you bucket of rust. We’re leaving!”

**//Not so fast, Hern.**

**//You would not leave without a suitable punishment, would you?**

“And you’re going to punish me?” the fleshbag demanded, though Solfis could spot signs of fear.

**//Not me, meat.**

**//Her.**

Hern turned when he heard a screech of rage, but even his dexterity only allowed him to save his eyes. A winged form jumped on him from the separation leading to the bed. Talons dug painfully into his face.

“Aaaaaah get it off! Get it off!”

Rayd had already left, as expected of the wise coward. Hern managed to detach the four claws and maw from his fleshy self and ran through the door, slamming it behind him.

Solfis looked on as Arthur spread her wings and screeched in victory. She licked her chops, fixed the golem with her malevolent crimson eyes, and climbed to her bed. She monched the

piece of ear she had successfully glomped and returned to the beatific sleep of the just. The intruder had been defeated. Order had prevailed. It was time for a nap.

Solfis returned to his calibration. He was almost done. Then, the real work could begin.